

WPS POLICY BRIEF - August 2019

Water, Peace & Security

Challenges for Central Mali

Understand ~ Mobilize ~ Learn ~ Dialogue ~ Act!

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SUMMARY

Central Mali is facing complex threats. The use and depletion of water resources is one of the underlying causes of conflict and grievances between communities. These water-related problems could be aggravated by new development activities in Mali and other parts of the Niger Basin. To mitigate the exacerbation of conflicts in central Mali, interventions by government agencies, the private sector and development agencies must be conflict-sensitive. In the case of water-related projects, this requires coordinated decision-making based on a risk perspective – not only by the actors concerned with water, energy and agriculture, but also by all the ministries involved. In their political dialogue with the government of Mali and in their technical and financial support activities, international partners should stress the importance of considering risk and of inter-ministerial coordination.

Mali is a continental country with a population of about 18 million. It is located in the semi-arid zone of the western Sahel. Its economy is dependent on its rivers, particularly the Senegal and the Niger, which are important sources of life. Since 2012 the country has faced massive security problems, which have spread increasingly from the north of the country to the central region. One of the major causes of conflict is access to natural resources with water being the most fundamental.

This policy brief aims not only to highlight the links between water, peace and security in the context of the current situation in central Mali, but also to identify future challenges. It is intended for national and international decision-makers active in Mali, and especially those concerned with the security situation.

The first part of the brief describes the Inner Niger Delta, the most important wetland in Mali due to its economic significance and social diversity. The second part provides a description of the current conflicts related to water resources. And the third discusses the challenges and opportunities associated with new water-related development activities. The brief ends with conclusions and recommendations for local and international actors, focusing on new water-related development projects.

1. THE INNER NIGER DELTA IN MALI

Mali's economy is dominated by its primary sector, which in turn depends largely on the contributions made by its ecosystems, and the wetlands in particular. The country's main wetland is the Inner Niger Delta (IND).¹ The IND is located in central Mali. It covers an area of about 4 million hectares,² making it roughly the same size as Switzerland. This is a vital region for the conservation of ecosystems and for biodiversity.

The IND is also important for food production, not just for Mali but for West Africa as a whole. The area accounts for about 15 per cent of the country's cereal production (maize, sorghum, millet, fonio, rice)³ and 80 per cent of its fisheries catch.⁴ During the dry season, the IND is also home to 50 per cent of the national livestock herd.

1. The 'cercles' (subregions) of Djenné, Youwarou, Mopti and Tenenkou in the Mopti Region, Goundam and Diré in the Timbuktu Region and Macina in the Ségou Region.
2. The Inner Niger Delta is classified as a Ramsar Site with an area of 41,195 km²; <https://www.ramsar.org>.
3. Ministry of Rural Development, SPC, Résultats définitifs de la campagne agro pastorale situation alimentaire et nutritionnelle 2015/2016 (Final results of the agro-pastoral campaign – food and nutrition situation, 2015/2016).
4. National Directorate of Fisheries, Bamako, Mali. (2012) *État des lieux du sous-secteur de la pêche et de l'aquaculture* (State of the fisheries and aquaculture subsector).

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The food production systems in the region are interlinked. During the rainy season, river floods force the livestock farmers to move their herds to dry land. The flooded areas, which vary in size from year to year, are used for growing rice and for fishing. When the waters retreat in the dry season, and the rice has already been harvested, the migrated herds return to take advantage of the green pastures, known as “bourgoutières”. These not only provide floating grass (bourgou), the main livestock feed in the IND, but are also used as breeding grounds for fish.⁵

Central Mali is a meeting place but also sometimes a scene of disagreement over resources use between settled groups, reliant on mainly agriculture and fishing, and pastoral groups leading nomadic, semi-nomadic or seasonally migratory lives. In addition to these communities, the IND is also home to groups involved in other sectors, such as commerce and public services. Many people tend to be active across sectors, and often combine different ways of life; for example, they may be both herders and traders, herders and farmers or fishermen and farmers.

2. WATER RESOURCE RELATED CONFLICTS

Competition over access and control of water resources is at the root of many of the conflicts affecting central Mali. Over the last decades, many bourgoutières have been converted into rice fields as a result of government decisions and climatic conditions.⁶ This agricultural expansion has led to changes in seasonal livestock migration routes and the fragmentation of pastoral areas. These changes have in turn hampered herd mobility and resulted in land and agro-pastoral disputes between herders and farmers.⁷

In addition to conflicts between herders and farmers, there are also conflicts between herders and fishermen and between fishermen and farmers, as well as within these communities. Among the pastoralists, for example, there are disputes both between groups and between different social strata within the same group.

Many of these conflicts revolve around access to water resources (ponds and bourgoutières). Some of the common issues include:

- Who has the right of first access to bourgoutières, when and at what cost?
- Within bourgoutières, which areas are allocated for fishing and which for pasture?

Disputes between socio-professional groups often have an ethnic dimension, too. For example, the distinction between pastoralists and farmers also divides the Fulani (or Peuls) on the one hand from the Dogon (in non-flood zones) or Bambara (in flood zones) on the other. Conflicts around ponds involve Bozo fishing communities.⁸

Inadequate conflict management

Conflict management in the IND is based on a combination of traditional and modern law. However, non-compliance with rules, regulations and customs is a pervasive problem, specifically including the failure to respect livestock migration corridors, agricultural calendars and fishing regulations.⁹ Moreover, the legislative framework governing land, agricultural and pastoral rights is unclear. One of the main shortcomings identified, are the entitlements granted to farmers as compared to those of the pastoralists: the legal framework defines neither the exact scope of the right to priority use of pastoral land nor the practicalities of exercising these rights.

5. Zwarts et al. (2005) *Le Niger, une Artère Vitale – Gestion efficace de l'eau dans le Bassin du Haut Niger*. Wetlands International : Ede. (The Niger, a vital artery: Effective water management in the Upper Niger Basin).
6. According to Kouyaté (2006), about a quarter of the floating grass fields in the delta have been converted to rice fields since the 1950s (Benjaminsen, T. and Ba, B.A. (2008) Farmer herder conflicts, pastoral marginalization and corruption: A case study from the inland Niger Delta of Mali. *The Geographical Journal*, 175, 71-81).
7. Benjaminsen, T. and Ba, B. A. (2018) 'Why do pastoralists in Mali join jihadist groups? A political ecological explanation. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 46(1): 1-20.
8. Focus groups led by International Alert in the Mopti region, 2018.
9. Focus groups led by International Alert in the Mopti region, 2018.

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Communities in the region also tend to lack confidence in the ability of the modern justice system to resolve their disputes. This is generally because they perceive the judges not to understand their local dynamics and their verdicts as favouring the wealthier classes.¹⁰ The system is also mistrusted for the slow pace of its proceedings and its corruption. But traditional justice is inadequate, too¹¹ – not only because it lacks the power to enforce its verdicts, but also because the legitimacy of the various traditional Fulani authorities is being questioned in an increasingly forceful manner, particularly by religious radicals. Misconduct within the defence and security forces does not facilitate good conflict management, either. Forestry and water officials,¹² for example, are accused of harassment, ill-treatment and racketeering to the particular detriment of certain local communities.¹³

Escalating violence

The armed conflict in northern Mali began spreading to the centre of the country from 2012, when the state effectively started to withdraw from the region. This encouraged the establishment and expansion of jihadist terrorist groups there. Small groupings allied to the jihadists were able to penetrate and take control of the region's social fabric through a strategy of providing services and jobs to weakened local communities, ensuring their protection and offering an ideological perspective. The IND is the region most affected by the jihadist version of Sharia law. The radicals' rhetoric particularly targets the most vulnerable sections of society: marginalised groups such as the landless, poor herders, former slaves and talibés (young Quranic scholars). Among other things, it calls into question the tax on *bourgoutières* levied by the traditional Fulani authorities and the unequal political and economic relationships in the region.¹⁴ Exaction of the tax is often sanctioned by the state security forces. This causes many Fulani shepherds to see it as a police racket based on collusion with both the state and traditional authorities.

The notion of 'fighting the jihadists' and the easy availability of weapons have led to a spiral of violence, including banditry.¹⁵ This in turn has prompted the formation of self-proclaimed self-defence militias, including Dogon and Fulani units. Local communities feel abandoned by the official defence and security forces, which they consider ineffective or even adding to their insecurity. There are claims that bandits have raided and plundered communities in the presence of soldiers who have failed to intervene, complaining that they lack the manpower and equipment needed to engage with such heavily armed groups. Countless cases of ill-treatment, abuse, arbitrary arrests, extortion and extra-judicial executions by the defence and security forces are also reported.¹⁶

Intercommunal violence

Between January 2018 and May 2019, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) documented 158 cases of human rights abuses allegedly committed by traditional hunters¹⁷ in the Mopti and Ségou regions or by armed self-defence groups from the Fulani community. These resulted in a total of at least 551 deaths.¹⁸

With more than 150 dead, the massacre at Ogossagou on 23 March 2019 is the most violent incident to date in central Mali. MINUSMA has indicated that, were they to come to trial, abuses documented on that occasion could constitute crimes against humanity.¹⁹ The Ogossagou massacre and other violent crimes in the region prompted the tabling of a motion of censure by the National Assembly, accusing the Malian state of being "unable to solve the urgent problems of the moment",²⁰ which resulted in a change of government. With more recent attacks in the Mopti region, the continuing intercommunal violence poses a huge challenge for the new government.

10. Ba, B.A. (2019) *Rapport d'analyse critique relative aux conflits liés à l'eau et aux ressources naturelles dans la Delta Intérieur du Niger* (Critical analysis of conflicts related to water and natural resources in the Inner Niger Delta), internal document.

11. Ursu (2018) *Finding justice amidst insecurity: Policy initiatives to strengthen the system of justice and conflict in Central Mali*, CRU Policy Brief, Clingendael.

12. Malian defence and security forces include not only the military, gendarmerie and police, but also paramilitary units such as customs, the water and forestry agency and the civil protection corps.

13. Discussion groups led by International Alert in the Mopti region, 2018.

14. Ba, B.A. (2019) *Rapport d'analyse critique relative aux conflits liés à l'eau et aux ressources naturelles dans la Delta Intérieur du Niger* (Critical analysis of conflicts related to water and natural resources in the Inner Niger Delta), internal document.

15. The term jihadist here refers to armed members of jihad-inspired groups, generally considered as coming from outside the region, who commit various types of crime. The term bandit refers to armed individuals, usually local to the area, who perpetrate similar crimes. (Ba, B.A. (2019). *Rapport d'analyse critique relative aux conflits liés à l'eau et aux ressources naturelles dans la Delta Intérieur du Niger* (Critical analysis of conflicts related to water and natural resources in the Inner Niger Delta), internal document).

16. Focus groups led by International Alert in the Mopti region, 2018.

17. The Dozos (traditional hunters) are Dogon or Bambara self-protection groups.

18. MINUSMA press briefing, 16 May 2019.

19. MINUSMA press release, 2 May 2019.

20. <https://www.maliweb.net/politique/motion-censure-contre-gouvernement-soumaila-cisse-demande-demission-moussa-mara-il-incapable-resoudre-les-problemes-urgents-lheure-368802.html>.

3. DEVELOPMENT PLANS RELATED TO THE RIVER NIGER

Besides the immense security challenge, there are many other urgent issues facing the government of Mali. The main one is to ensure the long-term food and energy security of its growing population in changing and unstable climatic conditions, while preserving the environment and biodiversity. Security, food and energy challenges are all closely linked with water resources.

To meet the ever-increasing needs of its population in terms of food security, energy and water supply, Mali – like other West African states – has undertaken major water-related infrastructure projects in the region's river basins. The principal works completed upstream of the IND are the dams at Markala and Sélingué. These generate power, but have also allowed for the development of large-scale irrigation systems, and fishing and fish farming to help increase food and nutritional security throughout the country. At the same time, however, they have impacted the area of the IND subject to flooding. This affects the availability of resources and hence fuels competition between communities in the Inner Niger Delta.²¹

Sensitivity to conflict

To harmonise the growing demand for food and energy with the need to restore security, new development projects must be conflict-sensitive. A conflict-sensitive approach implies a recognition that all such projects in vulnerable situations could have either negative or positive security impacts, and that action should be taken accordingly.

For example, there are various development plans related to the Niger River. To align the supply of agricultural produce and power with population growth, Mali's ministries of Agriculture and of Energy & Water are planning an extension of the irrigated areas under the administration of Office du Niger. Meanwhile, the government of Guinea is considering the construction of the proposed Fomi Dam at Folon on the Upper Niger.²² These projects offer clear benefits in terms of allocating water resources to a variety of uses, including agriculture and energy.

At the same time, however, they could also have negative effects that partially negate those benefits and cause problems in the IND. According to recent studies commissioned by Wetlands International (2018),²³ the impact of building the Fomi Dam and implementing the irrigation strategy proposed by the Hydro-Agricultural Development Plan (Plan d'Aménagement Hydro-Agricole, PAHA) – intended to extend the irrigated areas administered by Office du Niger – will vary depending on the scenarios chosen.

Ultimately, though, these projects risk aggravating conflicts because they could result in:

- a 3–13 per cent fall in rice production in the Inner Niger Delta;
- a 5–24 per cent decline fish trade in Mopti;
- a 2–17 per cent decrease in the area of the bourgoutières; and,
- a 2–8 per cent fall in the cattle population in Mopti.

These potential impacts are likely to be even greater if coupled with the worsening climatic conditions from the increase in global temperatures and the droughts due to extreme fluctuations in rainfall.

21. Between 1982 and 2011, the Sélingué Dam and the extension of the zones irrigated under the administration of the River Niger Office reduced the area of the delta subject to flooding by 9 per cent (<https://www.altwym.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/1849-Report-1832-final-Water-Crisis-Leo-Zwarts.pdf>).

22. Liersch, S. et al. (2019) Water Resources Planning in the Upper Niger River Basin: Are there gaps between water demand and supply? *Journal of Hydrology: Regional Studies* 21: 176-194.

23. Schep, S. W. et al. (forthcoming), BAMGIRE Ecosystem Services in the Inner Niger Delta. Wolfs Company.

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In addition to the plans for the Fomi Dam and the irrigated areas, there is also an IND Sustainable Development Programme. The Ministry of Planning and Decentralisation intends to implement this through an IND Master Plan for the Restoration and Conservation of Biodiversity and Natural Resources, which seeks to reconcile the sustainable development of communities with the preservation of biodiversity by adopting a participatory and integrated approach. Proposals in the Master Plan include the creation of perimeters to protect grazing land and measures to restore bourgoutières.²⁴

Dialogue

Because of their impacts on water resources, all of these plans will influence security in central Mali. To maximise their positive impacts and minimise the negatives, it is important that they be analysed from a risk and a conflict-sensitive perspective, taking into account various scenarios and possible alternatives.²⁵ This can be done through dialogue between the government departments responsible for developing the plans and those involved in their implementation and in maintaining security, including the ministries of Security & Civil Protection, of Peace & Reconciliation, of Environment, Sanitation & Sustainable Development and of Fisheries & Livestock. Environmental and social impact assessments should take conflict into account and should contribute towards informed policymaking based on independent information.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In a context of worsening agro-pastoral conflicts and renewed warfare, the complexity of the threats facing the IND in central Mali is undeniable. Competition for access to and control over water resources is at the root of many of the conflicts, which has the effect of pitting various ethnic groups, communities and social strata against one another. This issue is further compounded by climate change and population growth in the region. The difficulties created by these conflicts have led to violent clashes between users of the IND's limited resources. This outcome highlights the inability of the current policies of the Malian state to meet the expectations of its population.

It is important to restore peace and avoid new conflicts. This will require more than simply ceasing the violence. It is also about taking into account the underlying grievances of the communities concerned, reconciling their different interests and finding an acceptable compromise for the management of water resources. It is also important, to reflect on the role of women, vulnerable social groups, Quranic scholars, traditional authorities and the defence and security forces in the peace processes.

The use and depletion of water resources is already one of the fundamental sources of conflict in central Mali, and of grievances between and within its communities. New development projects such as the Fomi Dam, expansion of the irrigated area administered by the Office du Niger and the IND Master Plan for the Restoration and Conservation of Biodiversity and Natural Resources can impact this situation in either a positive or a negative way. Conflict-sensitivity should therefore be at the heart of responsible decision-making on all projects affecting water resources. The recommendations below focus on the risks and opportunities of new water-related development activities.

24. Ministry of Energy & Water, Integrated Water Resources Management Project (January 2018), Schéma Directeur de Restauration et de Conservation de la Biodiversité et des Ressources Naturelles du Delta Intérieur du Niger (Master Plan for the Restoration and Conservation of Biodiversity and Natural Resources of the Inner Niger Delta).

25. These alternatives include solar energy, optimising the efficiency of the irrigation system and choice of crops.

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Recommendations for the government of Mali

- Coordinate choices regarding the water-related development activities with the various ministries concerned – not just the ministries of Agriculture, of Energy & Water and of Territorial Planning & Decentralisation but also the ministries of Security & Civil Protection, of Peace & Reconciliation, of Environment, Sanitation & Sustainable Development and Fisheries & Livestock – to ensure that resource management is done in an integrated and sustainable way.
- Consider proposing new development projects from a risk and conflict-sensitivity perspective in order to maximise their positive impacts and minimise the negatives for all communities and users concerned with the security of the region, so as to prevent further violent water-related conflicts.
- Base new development projects on conflict analyses and the results of independent environmental and social impact assessments, and include the consideration of alternative development options.

Recommendations for international actors

Support the recommendations for the Government of Mali through:

- A dialogue with national actors to highlight the above points.
- Technical and financial support for independent impact assessments and the implementation of activities beneficial to security in relation to water.
- Good coordination of departments and organisations dealing with water, peace and security, both within and between individual financial and technical partners.

WATER, PEACE AND SECURITY PARTNERSHIP

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This policy brief was written by Joyce Kortlandt (Wetlands International), based upon contributions from Mori Diallo, Ibrahima Sadio Fofana, Mamadou Lamine Diawara, Beteo Zongo (Wetlands International), Boubacar Ba (consultant) and International Alert Mali, with advice from Camille Marquette (International Alert) and Karounga Keïta (Wetlands International). The policy brief was translated from french to english by UvA Talen.

For more information, please contact Joyce Kortlandt (joyce.kortlandt@wetlands.org) or Beteo Zongo (bzongo@wetlands-africa.org).

